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ABSTRACT

The values that are the foundations of the democratic system should be defined, taught, learned, and then put into action in the classroom. The issues associated with teaching values are so complex and controversial that many schools avoid dealing with them. These issues include: (1) teaching about religion; (2) teaching about citizenship and values; (3) training in citizenship and the behaviors related to it; and (4) budgeting money and time to teach citizenship education. Some suggestions for what the schools can do include: (1) using participatory decision-making in the classroom; (2) teaching moral reflection; (3) using real life situations from the classroom to encourage moral reflection; and (4) encouraging service to other people. (DJC)

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TEACHING DEMOCRATIC VALUES IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Marilyn Braveman

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Marilyn Braveman is director of education for the American Jewish Committee and coauthor of *Moral Education in the Life of the Schools* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development 1988). This paper was originally presented to the Plenum of the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council, February 15, 1988.

Schools are strange and wondrous places that defy easy definition and easy answers to questions about them. Can you picture any other multimillion-dollar operation where the largest number of participants are youngsters who are there because they are required to attend? Where they and their teachers come with wildly differing backgrounds, expectations and skills? To which society looks to bring people into the mainstream of American life, prepare them for the world of work and the world of the intellect, teach them to participate in a democratic, pluralistic society, feed them if they are hungry, provide health and mental-health services, teach them about such things as sex, family life and infectious diseases, provide a racially and socio-economically integrated environment that hardly reflects the rest of society, keep them off the streets, and -- quite incidentally -- teach them to read, write and compute, among other things?

Small wonder, then, in our pluralistic, heterogeneous, litigious, competitive, changing and beautiful country, that there are few answers to the challenge of public education, but rather a constantly evolving set of questions and responses. To be expert in school matters really means knowing how to frame these questions and provide some information that will help communities shape programs that are appropriate for their schools. It is in this spirit that I would like to talk with you about the topic for today -- "Teaching Democratic Values in our Schools."

It is obvious why this issue is "timely and provocative."

Timely, because at all levels of our society it is apparent that things aren't working the way we'd like them to. A look at daily newspapers tells the story. A policeman in New York, one of 18 about to be indicted on 80 different counts of robbery, drug dealing and other crimes, took no real responsibility for his actions. He was quoted as saying, "Why didn't somebody come down and just say, 'knock it off.' Why didn't [the department's Internal Affairs Division] come down and say, 'If you do that again you're fired.' Why not transfer us? Why jail?"

At the U.S. Department of Education, regional offices back-dated documents relating to civil-rights complaints to make it appear as if they had complied with deadlines set forth in a federal court order. A U.S. Government study found that "one of the nation's most influential researchers in the field of mental retardation treatment reported on experiments that were never carried out and published deliberately deceptive scientific papers." Then there's a case in which Justice Department officials used "trickery, fraud and deceit" to steal computer programs from a company that devised a case management system for Federal prosecutors. These are a few examples of the values of people we would hope to have as role models for our children.

Perhaps the need for better citizenship and values education is best described in the opening remarks at a conference held last spring by People for the American Way. Former President Tony Podesta said: "Not since Watergate have Americans seemed so concerned about our values: the beliefs that define us as a people. Concerned that nobody seems to be playing by the rules anymore, Americans are taking another look at the place where more of us get our formal lessons in the rules of society: the schools. Leaders as diverse as Ronald Reagan and Mario Cuomo, Pat Robertson and Jesse Jackson are engaged in public debate about how the schools can do more to teach young people the difference between right and wrong."

One suggested response has been to return to the "civics" courses from the "old days." But those courses merely provided us with facts, some true and some not so true, about American democracy, and assumed that this approach automatically would develop informed and active citizens. They glossed over the reality that to teach democracy effectively requires more than a knowledge of how our system works. It requires that the values that are the foundation of that system be defined, taught, learned and then put into action.

And that's where the complications begin. For the mere mention of "values" provokes a controversy that is as old as the schools themselves. The questions and objections are free-flowing: "Isn't the move to teach values, by any name, merely a smokescreen for those who wish to bring religious values in the schools?" "There is no time in the school day for such frills, other things are more important". "Whose values should be taught?" "It is the job of the family to teach values." "The schools should not indoctrinate young children." "Values clarification programs have taught moral relativism, and our children don't know right from wrong." "Should it be an educational priority to imbue students with an understanding of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights?" Does the recent discussion about the adequacy of a Western civilization curriculum suggest either a disenchantment with the values of our society or an effort to broaden the perspective from which to view them?

The questions are so complex and controversial that many schools shy away from dealing with them at all. But avoiding controversy doesn't make it go away. The controversial questions must be dealt with squarely so that schools can get on with their jobs.

The Questions and Some Responses

1. *The most controversial issue has to do with religion* and with our fears, partially justified, that anything that smacks of values is a smokescreen to bring teaching religious values into the schools. This problem is certainly reflected in recent court cases in Tennessee and Alabama, where parents objected to textbooks that did not teach their specific religious beliefs. We have won on those cases, at least for now, but they raise two related issues that are relevant to our discussion.

First, teaching religion is the job of the home and religious institutions. Parents who wish to have their children taught their religious beliefs in school as well are free to enroll them in religious schools of their choice. But teaching *about* religion is a legitimate purpose of the public schools, and it has been sorely neglected. Whatever one's views on religion are, it is undeniable that religious events and commitments have influenced America's history and culture. Religious liberty and religious pluralism are basic to American society, yet they are rarely referred to in our textbooks. There is an unusual consensus among People for the American Way, Americans United for Separation of Church and State and Secretary of Education William Bennett that this omission must be corrected.

Second, it is possible to teach values without teaching religion. In many cases, religious and civic values exist side by side. The process of learning both may be similar. But the reasons, sources and documents for learning about honesty, civility, responsibility, tolerance, loyalty, and so on, in a religious and nonreligious setting differ. Each is legitimate and valid in its own discrete setting.

2. *The belief that schools should teach values and citizenship is neither new nor radical.* Thomas Jefferson prescribed their study, saying that "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be." He emphasized the cultivation of civic virtue among all citizens and believed they were capable of using political power intelligently and responsibly. Yet no cohesive design emerged, and by the late 1950s, the view that schools should teach *no* values had gained some vogue among educators and social theorists. This approach ignored the fact that there is no such thing as a value-free education. Everything a child is exposed to in school reflects a value, and most of those values relate to the needs of an open and pluralistic democratic society. These include: the assumption that all children should receive an education, the way school rules are set and how fairly they are adhered to; the content, or lack of content, of textbooks, school policy and programs on inclusion or exclusion of minority cultures, and the relationship among various racial and ethnic groups; and the way teachers treat students and themselves are treated by students and administrators. Schools are not always conscious of the powerful effect they have on students' development, and many teachers lack the skill to discuss complex questions. But they inevitably deal with values all the time, whether they are conscious of it or not.

3. *One central purpose of education is to provide training in citizenship and the behaviors related to it.* The goal of producing thinking citizens for a democratic society of necessity is linked with values and behaviors that are variously described as moral-education programs, character-education programs or values-clarification programs. These are value laden terms that upset people and create barriers to bringing effective citizenship-education programs into the schools. It may be more helpful to talk instead about the traits we want taught. This has been done effectively in many places, including *1984 and Beyond: A Reaffirmation of Values,* published by a Task Force of the Baltimore, Maryland, County Public Schools. Among the traits identified are compassion, courtesy, equality of opportunity, honesty, human worth and dignity, integrity, justice, loyalty, patriotism, reasoned argument, respect for others' rights, rule of law, self-respect. Who could argue that those are behaviors that underpin America's democratic society?

4. *Citizenship education is worth the time and worth the money.* In fact, it might not take so much time or money. There are some fine examples of separate courses or programs such as those devised by the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children in New Jersey. Teachers are provided with materials that teach some skill or subject already included in the curriculum. The Constitutional Rights Foundation in California, a pioneer group in this field, works with other groups on "Educating for Citizenship" materials, which focus on classroom activities designed not only to promote civic participation but also to enhance reading, writing and critical thinking skills. These are just two examples among hundreds of programs in operation.

What Can the Schools Do?

1. *It is easy to get students to agree about values such as these, but it is much harder to get them to behave accordingly.* Thomas Lickona, a professor of education at SUNY-

Cortland, commenting in the February 1988 issue of *Kappan,* an influential education journal, makes some suggestions about how to do it in the classroom. He believes that *participatory decision-making* "provides a motivational push from judgment to action." It requires children to participate in making rules or solving classroom conflicts. They are then held accountable for these decisions, which eventually become group norms. This approach does not require a lot of time or money. It can be done, for example, with something as simple as a suggestion box, and can be expanded to include teacher/student learning contracts, small-group brainstorming sessions as a means of solving a persistent classroom problem, a "conflict corner" where two students can go to work out their differences, a teacher-moderated "fairness committee" to propose solutions to classroom problems, written or oral feedback from students to the teacher on a curriculum unit (What did you learn? How could it have been improved? How can we make the next unit better?), and regular class meetings.

Class meetings can be held weekly or daily, and they can be run by either consensus or by majority rule. Voting can be open (to encourage public stands) or by secret ballot (to minimize peer pressure). Through any of these methods, teachers can send the message to students that they value each child's viewpoint.

Participatory decision-making contributes to character development by helping children apply their moral reasoning to their own behavior and to the society around them. In a democratic society, participatory decision-making has a special value in that it teaches democracy *through* democracy, training an active citizenry by having children be active citizens in the life of their school.

2. Lickona also calls for teaching *"moral reflection"* because children need practice in learning to think about whether their actions are right or wrong. He describes what happened in a second-grade class during a science project, in which the class was incubating 20 chicken eggs. The teacher suggested they open one each week to monitor the embryonic development. One seven-year-old confided to the teacher that he thought it was cruel to kill the chick. The teacher listened without comment and said she would bring the topic up for discussion with the class. When she did, there was some agreement that the point was worth considering. But many children were curious to see what the embryo looked like. The seven-year-old said curiosity wasn't a good enough reason for killing a chick, and that the library must have pictures of chick embryos. Some countered that they wanted to see a *real* chick, and there was a spirited discussion about whether the chicken was alive before it hatched. The teacher asked the children to consider the issue overnight and said they would reach a decision as a class the following morning. By that time, a majority had come to feel that the objection should be honored. They did not open the eggs. What does this have to do with democratic values? The children a) considered the question of whether all life is to be taken seriously; b) learned that simply wanting to do something isn't a good enough reason for doing it; c) learned that if a member of a group has strong feelings about something, he or she has a right to express them; d) learned that others have an obligation to listen; and e) experienced that a conflict should be resolved in a way that tries to respect the opinions of all parties.

3. It is best to help students come to grips with complex issues with conflicting values by *using the real life of the classroom,* such as the charming chick story rather than using "canned" dilemmas from a book or kit. A horrible dilemma exercise had some vogue several years ago. The class is asked to discuss the moral dilemma of the girl in the following story: "It is midnight. She wants to visit her boyfriend, who is on an island in the middle of a lake. The only way to get there is by rowboat. The owner of the only rowboat will lend

it to her if she has sex with him. What should she do?" This is the kind of exercise that has angered, dismayed and offended the ethical and religious sensibilities of parents around the country, and it is a perfect example of how *not* to teach values.

4. *Helping other people:* The idea of service, of groups helping other groups is a central facet of our society that we do not adequately acknowledge. For example, the young pay Social Security taxes to help the elderly, and will in turn be the recipients of the taxes of others when they themselves grow older.

Schools are supported by those who have children, who don't have children, who have no children of school age, or who choose not to send their children to public schools, in order to serve young children and society.

All of you here are deeply involved in Jewish communal service to Jews and non-Jews. Yet all of us know of the problems of diminishing numbers of individual volunteers and the cynicism that increasingly greets the idea of unpaid service.

Except in the schools. Our schools and our young people may be leading us in this basic democratic value. Increasingly they have been adopting community-service programs for good and practical reasons. Studies have shown consistent academic improvement for the tutor and the tutee in peer-tutoring programs. These programs are not limited to the elite, the highly achieving. Imagine the increased self-esteem of a youngster who is usually the recipient of service when his or her particular skills are recognized and rewarded. One school superintendent in New York brings high-school students whose first language is other than English into his school to teach that language to others. The Early Adolescent Helper Program in New York City places student volunteers in senior centers, child care, latchkey and headstart programs. Young people all over the country are learning firsthand about the world of work and preparing for their own roles as citizens, workers and parents, and, at the same time, providing extra hands for overworked community-service-agency staff while simultaenously receiving school credit. These are just a few examples that should be encouraged more in our communities.

In closing, I want to respond to the idea of teaching about non-Western civilization. It doesn't necessarily reflect disenchantment with Western values, but rather a more sophisticated understanding of the nature of pluralism in America. American values have been and should continue to be the lens through which we view society. That view encompasses an increasing appreciation of the vigor and strength of the languages, cultures and customs that old immigrant groups are rediscovering and that new immigrant groups are bringing. It's called pluralism, it's called democracy, it's the American way of life, and our children deserve to enjoy it.

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